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Law agencies get high-tech linkup

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Inter-agency communication at all levels remains one of the top law enforcement priorities in the post-Sept. 11, 2001, environment, and Ouachita Parish is poised to take the next step toward that goal.

Sheriff Richard Fewell is using federal money to provide deputies access to all local, state and federal databases via laptop computers inside a patrol unit.

Thinkstream Inc. will set up a network to one computer to interact with several other networks that previously were not compatible. The Sheriff's Office, once linked, will become the networks' regional hub that eventually will include other northeastern sheriffs' and police departments.

"This will make sure everyone has the same information, and, more importantly, it will be in the field where it is needed most," Fewell said.

He is hoping also to expand the system to include the District Attorney's Office, Clerk of Courts and the District judges.

"My part will be coming in the three to four months," said Sheriff Richard Fewell. "The funding is already there."

Thinkstream, already operating in eight regions of the state, is quickly expanding, according to its president, Barry Bellue.

"There are 35 to 40 separate agencies linked right now," he said. "That will grow to as many as 200 by the end of the year.

"This have never been done before locally. It provides not only access to a 150-plus databases nationwide but also to each other's local systems."

The access to the other systems is not the main point of the system - quick access is, according to Col. Mike Barnett, chief deputy for East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff's Office. The office adopted the Thinkstream network about two years ago.

"Prior to this technology, you would have to call into communications with a license plate number, for example," he said.

With that information, the communications officer would have to access a sequence of separate databases before relaying the same information that the patrol officer can now get within a minute through Thinkstream, he explained.

"It would take up to 10 minutes," Barnett said. "You could never follow that car for that long. If that car was stolen or the driver wanted, you would never follow it for three minutes."

When a law officer enters a license plate with the system, the system will produce

the name, criminal history and a picture of the vehicle's registered owner.

"Everything you would need to know about the vehicle can be known," he said. "You know before you walk up to that car what you might be facing. That's one of the uses. There are hundred of databases that can all be run simultaneously."

He said they are now checking databases more than they never did before because of time constraints, such as the terrorism watch lists and immigration lists.

In addition to those federal lists, Marky Tucker, grants manager for Fewell's office, hopes the system will aid in the capture of fugitives on less serious local crimes. All felony warrants go into the National Crime Information Center, but not all of the misdemeanors.

"A lot of warrants remain outstanding unless they are felonies just because they are not in the system we use," she said. "Too many fall through the system."

In addition to the East Baton Rouge Parish region, others using Thinkstream include Orleans Parish, Bossier Parish, Lake Charles and Lafayette.

Use of the Thinkstream network in the courtroom could also speed up the judicial process. Many of those involved with the courts met with Bellue on Friday to discuss the prospect.

"The ultimate goal of the sheriff, DA and the court is to be on the same page," said Fourth Judicial District Judge Marcus Clark after the meeting. "(Thinkstream) can come and make all our systems talk with each other. We can eliminate waste of valuable time and make fewer mistakes."

Under the current situation, as many as five workers are hand-writing notes only to wait until the court session's end to input the information in separate computers in several offices, he said.

"The new system will have one person typing," said fellow District Judge Wendell Manning. "The judge and other offices can quickly retrieve material. A definite level of increased efficiency is to be gained."

Neither judge would speculate when that aspect of the program would be running.